

The Mining Boom (Modeling Passage for Think-Alouds)

The mining boom in the western United States had begun with the California Gold Rush of 1849. When the Gold Rush ended, miners looked for new opportunities. The merest rumor of gold sent them racing east in search of new strikes. **STOP**

Gold and Silver Strikes

In 1859, two young prospectors struck gold in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Suddenly, another miner, Henry Comstock, appeared. “The land is mine,” he cried and demanded to be made a partner. From then on, Comstock boasted about “his” mine. The strike became known as the Comstock Lode. A lode is a rich vein of gold or silver. **STOP**

Comstock and his partners often complained about the heavy blue sand that was mixed in with the gold. It clogged the devices used for separating the gold and made the gold hard to reach. When the Mexican miners took the “danged blue stuff” to an expert in California, tests showed it was loaded with silver. Comstock had stumbled onto one of the richest silver mines in the world. **STOP**

Miners moved into many other areas of the West. Some found valuable ore in Montana and Idaho. Others struck it rich in Colorado. In the 1870s, miners discovered gold in the Black Hills of South Dakota. In the late 1890s, thousands rushed north to Alaska after major gold strikes were made there. **STOP**

Boom Towns and Ghost Towns

Towns sprang up near all the major mining sites. First, miners built a tent city near the diggings. Then, thousands of people came to supply the miners’ needs. Traders brought mule teams loaded with tools, food, and clothing. Merchants hauled in wagonloads of supplies and set up stores. **STOP**

Soon, wood-frame houses, hotels, restaurants, and stores replaced the tents. For example, it took less than a year for the mining camp at the Comstock Lode to become the boom town of Virginia City, Nevada. **STOP**

Many boom towns lasted for only a few years. When the gold or silver was gone, miners moved away. Without miners for customers, businesses often had to close. In this way, a boom town could quickly go bust and turn into a ghost town. Still, some boom towns survived and prospered even after the mines shut down. In these towns, miners stayed and found new ways to make a living. **STOP**

The surge of miners into the West created problems. Mines and towns polluted clear mountain streams. Miners cut down forests to get wood for buildings. Few miners got rich quickly. Much of the gold and silver lay deep underground. It could be reached only with costly machinery. Eventually, most mining in the West was taken over by large companies that could afford to buy the equipment. **STOP**